

TEACHER'S CORNER: VIKINGS IN YOUR CLASSROOM

by Elisabeth Ward

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With the millennial anniversary of the Vikings' arrival in North America upon us, the Vikings have become a hot topic. This teacher's corner builds on that enthusiasm with solid teaching ideas. Following the reading of the *AnthroNotes*' lead article, the questions below should provoke lively class discussion.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

1. **Viking Ships.** The impressive double-prowed ship of the Vikings is a well known icon. Viking ships were essential components of the Viking culture. How important was the Viking ship during the Viking Age? How did technological changes, like iron production and ship building techniques, influence Viking society? Finally, what have archaeologists learned about Viking ships in the last 100 years?

2. **Contacts with Native Peoples.** According to the Vinland Sagas, when Vikings first arrived in North America they met strange people they called Skraelings. Who were the Skraelings? What evidence do we have that the Vikings met them? How extensive do anthropologists believe that interaction was? How was the Viking meeting with Native Americans different from Columbus' encounter 500 years later? What might have motivated these two peoples to interact?

3. **Understanding the Sagas.** Sagas are a form of literature developed in Iceland; tales that had been told for generations were preserved in books during the 13th and 14th centuries. The best known sagas focus on the adventures of the early settlers of Iceland (ca. A.D. 900), some of whom also went on Viking raids. Which sagas are important for the discovery of North America, and why? Do you see

any problems with using the sagas for information about the past?

4. **The Viking Age in Europe.** The Viking Age was a time of transition and change in Europe and in Scandinavia. What event marks the beginning of the Viking Age, and what event marks the end? How far did the Vikings get, and what were their main areas of interest? What motivated the Viking raids? What influence did the Vikings have in Europe? Discuss the problems and advantages to using the name "Viking". What did "Viking" mean in the narrow sense or literal meaning of the word?

5. **Religion and the Vikings.** What religion did the Vikings practice, and what religion did their southern neighbors believe in? Look on the web or in other Viking books for names of the Viking gods. How might religious differences color Vikings' understanding of other cultures and vice versa? By the end of the Viking Age, Viking kings and Viking settlers abroad were converting to Christianity. How do you think this conversion changed Viking society?

6. **Greenland.** The Greenland colony existed for almost 500 years and then mysteriously died out. Explain the importance of ivory in the economy of the Greenland Norse before it became extinct. What new sources of information are archaeologists using to understand what happened to the Greenlanders? What was the temperature like in Greenland when the Vikings first arrived, and how did it change? What other changes were taking place that might have led to the colony's collapse?

7. **Vikings in Popular Culture.** What is wrong with our current stereotypical image of the horned helmeted Viking warrior? Look for modern advertisements using horned-helmeted characters; what is the context, and what does this imply about the symbolism of the horned-helmets? How has this modern image emerged? Why do you think the Vikings continue to be popular today?

WEB RESOURCES

The Internet is teeming with sites about the Vikings and the Viking Age. However, the following four sites have been recommended by the National Museum of Natural History's Office of Education.

<http://www.mnh.si.edu/vikings/> is the web site developed with the National Museum of Natural History's exhibition. In addition to an overview of the exhibit, it also has a multi-media "voyage" of the Viking world, focusing on how we know about the past.

<http://viking.norden.org> links to many Scandinavian Viking sites, most with English summaries or translations. Often these are the best sources for basic Viking information.

www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/vikings/ is the new PBS site related to the documentary listed below. It is an excellent site for students doing research, rather than for teachers.

www.realtime.com/~gunnara/ is the home of the Viking Answer Lady, who really knows her subject and conveys information in a fun way. The graphic style does make it difficult to read for extended periods.

FILM DOCUMENTARIES

Four documentaries your class might enjoy are:

Leif Eriksson, the Man who Almost Changed the World (2000) was developed concurrently with the Smithsonian's exhibit, though it focuses on the life of Leif Eriksson and his discovery of North America. It is available both as VHS and as High Definition CD. To order, contact Ward TV in Georgetown, Washington D.C. at (202) 333-4500.

"The Vikings" by Nova (2000). This two-hour special is divided into two parts. Part one focuses on the Vikings at home and their expansion westward, touching on their discovery of North America. Part two, adapted from Swedish Television, features new

information on the Viking activities in Russia. To order, call 1-800-949-8670.

Secrets of the Dead: The Lost Vikings of Greenland (1996). Part two of a four part series, this documentary provides insight into current research in Greenland that helps scientists reconstruct past environments, particularly from clues such as bug remains and ice-core samples. To order call 1-800-PBS-SHOP (727-7467); email: www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/vikings/resources.

Ancient Mysteries: The Vikings in North America (1996). Narrated by Leonard Nimoy, this one hour documentary summarizes what is known from archaeology and history about the Viking voyages to North America. Available from New Video Group, 126 Fifth Ave. NY, NY 10011; (212) 206-8600.

MUSEUM RESOURCES

National Museum of Natural History

In conjunction with the Smithsonian's exhibition, each museum on the venue schedule (above) is developing educational components. Please contact your nearest venue to discover what they have planned. The National Museum of Natural History has developed the following supplemental materials that you can order from the Scheduler, Office of Education, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560-0158; (202) 357-2747; fax: (202) 786-2778.

Family Guide: This 13-page workbook is intended for families with children aged 3 to 15 as they walk through the exhibition. It will be available wherever the exhibit tours. Young students also enjoy doing these activities at home. The activities were developed by a Maine teacher.

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"AT THIS RATE IT'LL PROBABLY TAKE THEM 500 YEARS TO SORT IT OUT..."

Teacher's Guide: Developed by Carolyn Sadler (National Museum of Natural History) for grades 4 and above, this guide includes a discussion of how we know about the Viking past, suggested activities for the classroom, a pronunciation guide, and an excellent general bibliography.

The York Archaeological Trust. This is the research division of the Jorvik Viking Center in York, England, a tremendously popular museum with a Disney inspired "ride" through the actual archaeological site. The Center also has a hands-on archaeological workshop. Though visiting the museum is best, they also have materials available. For more information or to order samples of their activities, write: Cromwell House, 13 Ogleforth, York YO1 2JG or e-mail: postmaster@yorkarch.demon.co.uk.

Roskilde Ship Museum. In conjunction with the Lejre Learning Museum of Denmark, Roskilde's education department has developed a number of hands-on activities for a range of ages. This includes making trade bags and beads, weaving, and painting runestones. Most importantly, Roskilde has a prepared, English language guide for building one's own Viking ship. At least one high-school in the US (Minersville, PA) has built a ship using this plan. Roskilde can be reached by phone at: (45) 46 30 02 00 or by mail: Postbox 298, Roskilde, Denmark DK-4000.

Elisabeth Ward is assistant curator of the Viking exhibition and co-editor of the exhibit catalog, "Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga."